

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 812

EC 221 270

AUTHOR Aiello, Barbara; Shulman, Jeffrey  
TITLE Business Is Looking Up: Featuring Renaldo Rodriguez.  
The Kids on the Block Book Series.  
REPORT NO ISBN-0-941477-00-2  
PUB DATE 88  
NOTE 51p.; For related books, see EC 221 271-277.  
AVAILABLE FROM Twenty-First Century Books, 38 South Market St.,  
Frederick, MD 21701 (\$12.95).  
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner)  
(051) -- Creative Works (Literature, Drama, Fine Arts)  
(030) -- Books (010)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Blindness; Books; Braille; \*Childhood Attitudes;  
Childrens Literature; Elementary Education; Fiction;  
Peer Acceptance; Self Concept; \*Visual Impairments;  
Visually Handicapped Mobility

## ABSTRACT

One of a series of children's books written from the point of view of an elementary grade child with a disability or other problem, the stories emphasize similarities in childhood experience while providing information specific to the disability. In this book, 11-year-old Renaldo, visually impaired since birth, sets up a greeting card service for stepfamilies and learns there is more to running a business than just making money. After the story, a question and answer section provides answers (by Renaldo) of typical questions children often have about visual impairment. These include: "If you're blind, how do you eat?" "How did you get blind?" "How do you read?" "What is Braille?" "What are 'Talking Books'?" "How do you use a stylus and slate to write?" "What do you use your cane for?" "If you go somewhere new, how do you keep from bumping into things?" "Will you ever drive a car?" "Is it true that blind people hear and smell things better than people who can see?" "How do you use the phone?" "Are you going to get a seeing-eye dog?" "How can you tell differences in money?" "Do you know what colors are?" "How do you make friends, and how do your friends treat you?" (DB)

# Business Is Looking Up

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# Business Is Looking Up

Meet  
**RENALDO**

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**Birthday:** October 31

("Trick or Treat!")

**Best friends:**

Jinx Braxton

Jeremy Kendall

**Hobbies:**

Computers

Bothering my kid  
brother Josue

**Sports:**

Soccer

Swimming

**Favorite food (Yum!):**

Pepperoni and sausage pizza  
("From Polotti's Pizza  
Palace")

**Favorite subjects:**

Reading

Recess

**Yuck!:**

Making my bed

Broccoli ("Double yuck!")

Watching Josue

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**Renaldo Rodriguez**



THE KIDS ON THE BLOCK BOOK SERIES

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# Business Is Looking Up

*Featuring Renaldo Rodriguez*

Barbara Aiello and Jeffrey Shulman

Illustrated by Loel Barr

**TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BOOKS**  
**FREDERICK, MARYLAND**

Twenty-First Century Books  
38 South Market Street  
Frederick, Maryland 21701

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Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Book designed by Robert Hickey

#### Special Sales:

The Kids on the Block Book Series is available at quantity discounts with bulk purchase for educational, charitable, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please write to: Marketing Director, Twenty-First Century Books, 38 South Market Street, Frederick, Maryland, 21701.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Aiello, Barbara.

Business is looking up: featuring Renaldo Rodriguez / by Barbara Aiello and Jeffrey Shulman; illustrated by Loel Barr.

(The Kids on the Block book series)

Summary: When a visually impaired eleven year old sets up a greeting card service for stepfamilies, he discovers there is a lot more to running a business than just making money. Includes a question-and-answer section about what it's like to be blind.

ISBN 0-941477-00-2

[1. Visually handicapped—Fiction. 2. Moneymaking projects—Fiction. 3. Blind.] I. Shulman, Jeffrey, 1951— II. Barr, Loel, ill. III. Title. IV. Series: Aiello, Barbara. Kids on the Block book series.

PZ7.A26924Bu 1988

[Fic]—dc19

To the children who teach us about differences—  
and similarities



# CHAPTER 1

“Renaldo. Hey, Renaldo!”

I was sitting in class trying to pay attention to Mr. Beame, my fifth-grade teacher. He was describing the four basic food groups. I heard him turn towards the blackboard and start to write. The chalk made a squeaky sound as he began to draw. It sent a shiver down my spine. (Ouch!)

“Hey, Renaldo!” My friend Jeremy Kendall was trying to whisper my name, but it was coming out kind of loud.

“Renaldo, over here!”

I was thinking about *my* four favorite food groups—pizza, ice cream, hamburgers, and french fries—when I heard Jeremy calling my name again.

“Pssst, Renaldo! I have a big problem,” Jeremy said.

He had looked all over the Woodburn Shopping Center for a birthday card for his stepmother. Not a real corny one, and not a real mushy one, not even a funny one—just a nice card to tell his stepmother that he liked having her around.

Sure, there were plenty of cards for “Mom” or “Mother,” cards for “Mommy,” and even “Mother Darling.” But none of them said “Stepmom” or “Stepmother” or step-anything!

“You know what I found?” he whispered. “Not a one. Nothing.” He stopped for a moment. “Nada,” he said with a smile in his voice.

“So make your own card,” I whispered back.

When I heard the box of markers clatter out of Jeremy’s desk, I knew that’s exactly what he was doing. In seconds I smelled magic marker drifting through the air. The smell must

have drifted to Mr. Beame's nose, too, because he put on his best "I mean business" voice and called Jeremy to the front of the room.

That was when it hit me—the idea, I mean. The business idea! I started thinking about all the kids I knew who had step-parents or stepbrothers or stepsisters and—well, believe me, it can get pretty complicated. Especially when it comes to birthdays and holidays. And what about Father's Day and Mother's Day? It's hard enough on a kid without spending half the day looking for . . . looking for . . . for a STEPCARD!

I was still thinking about stepcards at dinner. I was thinking so hard that I even forgot where the broccoli was on my plate—and I actually ate some!

You see, since I'm blind, Mom helps me find my food by pretending my plate is like a clock. My meatloaf was at nine o'clock, my salad was at three o'clock, and the broccoli was at six. I was so busy thinking about stepcards that I got my times mixed up!

"Renaldo Rodriguez eating broccoli! Now that's a sight for sore eyes," my Mom said and laughed to herself. She thought that was very funny. "Something on your mind?" she said.

I knew great business ideas need time to grow, and this one had just been planted in my head. So I didn't say a word. I just aimed my fork for six o'clock and choked down another piece of broccoli.

"Hey, Mom, this is great!" I said. That threw her off the track.

## CHAPTER 2

**M**y younger brother is Josue. That's Spanish for Joshua. (It's pronounced "Ho-sway.") If you really want to know about Josue, though, I think you should try looking up the Spanish word for "pest."

We like to play Scrabble after dinner. That night Josue had the game out before I even had a chance to clear the table. But I just wasn't paying attention. I wasn't taking the time to feel the Braille dots on the Scrabble letters.

"Josue," I said. "Do you remember that calculator I told you about? The one made special for blind people? I have an idea how I might get the money to buy one."



"Oh, you've told me about that calculator a hundred times already," Josue complained. I heard the Scrabble letters swishing off the board and clattering back into the box. I guess Josue had heard enough. "You've got that calculator on the brain," he complained. "Tell it to somebody else!"

And that's just what I did. "Dial B for Braxton," I said to myself, and I headed for the telephone. "Now, this is an idea that Jinx Braxton will love."

"Jinx!" I shouted when she answered the phone. I sure was excited about my business idea. "It's me! Renaldo. Renaldo Rodriguez!"

"Renaldo, you're the only Renaldo I know," Jinx said. "And you don't have to holler! I can hear you."

I explained the whole idea to her—"R.R. Stepcards" I called it. That was a pretty clever name, even I have to admit. I told her how I would make and sell cards for people who had step-families: birthday cards, get well cards, Valentine cards—the list was endless!



"What do you think, Jinx? Am I going to be Woodburn's first millionaire?"

There was silence on the other end. I could tell Jinx was thinking about it. She always thinks about things before she gives her opinion. And she always thinks about what other people might think. "Opposing viewpoints," she calls them. Jinx does a lot of thinking.

"Well," she finally asked, "have you done any marketing research?"

"Marketing research?"

"Have you thought about your investment?"

"Investment?"

Jinx was on a roll. I felt doomed.

"Oh, how will you advertise?"

I felt it coming, but I couldn't stop it. "Advertise?" I said. "Just listen to me," I thought to myself, "Renaldo Rodriguez, the human echo!"

Research? Investment? Advertising? "Jinx," I said, "this is starting to sound like work! Explain this stuff to me."

I knew Jinx was excited. I could hear the excitement in her voice. "Look," she began, "marketing research is the first thing you do. You find out if someone else has already thought of your idea. You find out if there's such a thing as a stepcard. If there's not, then you can figure out your investment. That's how much money you want to spend to get the business started."

"Spend?" I said. "But I want to *make* money, Jinx."

"I know," Jinx said in her most patient voice. "But you can't get something for nothing. We will have to buy markers and paper, maybe even paints and stencils, too. That's our investment."

"*Our* investment? When did it become *our* investment?"

"Renaldo, this is an excellent idea," Jinx continued. "But there's a lot to do. You're going to need a partner." And I didn't even have the time to say "A partner?" before Jinx jumped in again. "Hmmm . . . I do like the sound of it," she said. "Yes, 'R.R. and J.B. Stepcards.' I like the sound of it very much."

And you know what? So did I. With J.B. as my partner, I was more excited than ever—so excited that I couldn't get to sleep that night. I turned my pillow to the cold side a hundred times until I gave up trying to sleep. I got out my stylus and slate and started to write: "R.R. and J.B. Stepcards. For Your Favorite Stepfriender." There were stepfathers, stepmothers, stepbrothers, stepsisters, stepgrandmothers—the list went on and on. "For All Occasions." There were birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, holidays—and so many more. I started counting our profits. I couldn't help it.

"Excuse me, Mr. Businessman," Josue said, hiding a big yawn. "Mom already came in here. She made me stop reading. We're supposed to be asleep, you know."

Josue was right. Mom doesn't let us read or write after lights out. But, you see, I don't have to sneak under the covers with a flashlight the way Josue does.

"I'm not reading," I told Josue. "This, my little brother, is marketing research—I think."

"It looks like reading to me. It's not fair. I ought to tell on you!" Josue climbed out of bed to get a better look. "Just what kind of business is this anyway?"

"None of *your* business," I said firmly. And I closed my slate. I wasn't taking any chances on someone stealing the business idea of the century, certainly not a nosy little brother. I turned my pillow over for the last time.

"Let's go to sleep."

## CHAPTER 3

The next day was Saturday, and with lots of kids from Woodburn, Jinx and I headed for the mall. We take turns delivering the "Woodburn Flyer" to the stores at the Woodburn Shopping Center. The "Flyer" is the free newspaper that tells about all the things happening at Woodburn. Then it's time for fun.

But this Saturday was different. Today, there were no video games, no french fries, no window-shopping. Today, we were all business.

I knew we were near Calloway's Cards and Gifts when I smelled the tempting aroma of cheese, tomato sauce, and special toppings. Polotti's Pizza Palace was just next door to the card store.

"I don't think I can do the marketing research on an empty stomach. How about a business lunch?" I was tapping my cane toward the sweet smell of Polotti's.

"Renaldo," Jinx said sternly, "we don't have much time."

"Okay. Okay," I said. "Give me your arm." Jinx was right. We really didn't have much time. "It will be faster for me to walk alongside you—and less temptation, too."

There must have been a thousand different kinds of cards in Calloway's, and each one was cornier or mushier than the last. One thing about those cards, though—they really cracked us up!

"Look at this one, Renaldo," Jinx said.

*"To My Daughter and Her Husband on This Special Day,"* Jinx read. She described the card to me. "It's big," she said, passing it to me.

"It's almost the size of our spelling notebook," I said, feeling around the edges of the card.

"It has two pink hearts with bows on them. Two white doves are holding the ends of the ribbons in their mouths. It looks like the words *Happy Anniversary* are coming right out of their beaks," Jinx giggled.

I could feel the raised lines of the hearts, the bows, and the birds. "Yuk," I said, "it sounds pretty corny to me."

"Listen to this, Renaldo."

*To My Daughter and Her Husband on This Special Day:*

*'Like two white doves are lovers true,*

*Like two pink hearts forever new.*

*I hope this day will always view*

*A ribbon of happiness just for you.'*

"Double yuk," I said. "Who buys this mush?"

"Here's another one, Renaldo," Jinx said. "*Congratulations on Your New Baby!* It has a picture of a stork with a baby in a diaper hanging in its mouth."

"It must look so silly," I said, trying hard not to giggle too loudly.

"It gets worse." Jinx was cracking up. "When you open up the card, the stork drops the baby—plop!—right on somebody's doorstep!"

"It sounds like a wet diaper to me!" I squealed. Jinx was laughing, too. But then she suddenly stopped. I could tell she was really thinking.

"But, Renaldo," she said in a serious voice, "somebody buys these cards, and"—she was getting very excited—"there are no stepcards!"

Now I was getting excited, too. We did a high-five right there in Calloway's. "We're going to be rich!" we both shouted.



"C'mon, Renaldo," Jinx urged, "let's go home and get to work."

"Be sure to save an extra large pepperoni and sausage for Woodburn's youngest millionaires!" I shouted when we passed Polotti's.

## CHAPTER 4

Getting to work was not as easy as it sounded.

Jinx and I had to buy the paper for the cards. We put our money together for an investment of twelve dollars and thirty-two cents. ("That's a lot of french fries," I thought.) We had to decide what kind of cards to make. We had to think of designs for the front of the cards and messages to go inside. We had to find a way to let people know about "R.R. and J.B. Stepcards."

Let's face it: We had a lot to learn about starting a business.

When I have more questions than answers, I always turn to the expert—my Mom. "Mom," I said when she got home from work, "Jinx and I need to speak to an old hand in the business world."

"Good luck finding one," she replied as she started to take off the running shoes she wears to work.

"No, Mom," I explained, "I meant you."

"Oh," she said, looking up. "What can this 'old hand' do for you?"

My Mom knows about business, especially bad businesses. She works in an office helping people who bought things that don't work or aren't safe. I figured if she knew all about bad businesses, she could tell us how to start a good one.

Jinx and I explained our business idea. "How do we get started?" Jinx asked.

"How do we make lots of money?" (I guess you can figure out who asked that one!)

Mom thought for a while. Then she spoke slowly. "Jinx, Renaldo, starting and running a business is not so easy. It's more than just making money. A successful business needs a good product to sell or a useful service to offer. And a successful businessman—or businesswoman—thinks about the customer all the time. Ask yourself: 'What do they want?' 'How can my product or my service help them?'"

Jinx and I were trying to listen to all of this, but it wasn't easy. We *did* have a lot to learn.

"Now, you two have a good product," Mom continued. "I'm proud of you for coming up with this idea. But a good idea is not enough. You need to plan carefully."

"What do we do, Mrs. Rodriguez?" Jinx asked.

"Well," Mom said, "you need to figure out how much money you'll need to get started and where the money will come from. You need to decide who will do the work and, believe me, a business *is* work. Now, if you're still interested in 'R.R. and J.B. Stepcards,' let's make a plan!"

"Always ask the expert," I shouted. I could hear the rubber soles of Mom's shoes make that familiar squeegy sound. Mom wears business suits and running shoes every day to work. Dad says she's dressed for success from her head to her knees—but her feet are dressed for failure! That always makes me laugh.

With Mom's help we really got started. Jinx and I used our "investment" to buy paper, paints, markers, and stencils. We worked every day after school. We took turns with the stencils to make the designs. We'd take a small roller and dip it into a bright color of paint. When we'd smooth the roller over the stencil, there was a butterfly or flower or other designs. Jinx said they looked great!

I liked making up the words for our stepcards. I thought of some pretty good ones, if I must say so myself.

*To My Stepfather:*

*'Getting to know you hasn't been half bad.*

*I'm glad Mom picked you to be my Stepdad!'*

Well, I didn't say they were great cards.

*To My Stepsister:*

*'You have two families, I know that's true.*

*But I want you to know that I love you, too!'*

All right, so Renaldo Rodriguez has a mushy side. Don't rub it in!

## CHAPTER 5

**A**t the end of just one week, Jinx and I had 34 cards ready to go.

"To go where?" I asked.

"Where else?" Jinx said. "Why, the Woodburn School and Community Center!" It was time to advertise, and Woodburn was the place to start.

The Woodburn School was the oldest school building in the city. It almost closed the year before. There just weren't enough kids to fill it up, I guess. That's why the school board decided to add a Community Center. Now there was a day-care room for little kids and an activity center for older people, too. Woodburn is like a little city all its own.

The first thing on Monday morning Jinx and I marched down to Woodburn and showed our cards to Mr. Mohammadi, the assistant principal. Boy, was he excited!

"A sound idea," he said. "A very sound business idea. And you'll get a real education in the bargain. A real education. How can I help?"

We explained that advertising "R.R. and J.B. Stepcards" was the next part of our business plan.

"Let's see now." Mr. Mohammadi was thinking out loud. "You can put advertisements in the school newspaper, posters in the Senior Center, flyers to go home. . . ." Mr. Mohammadi was pacing the floor and spouting new ideas faster than . . . faster than . . . well, faster than Jinx and I could write them down.

"This is going to be a snap," I predicted. "I should have started a business years ago. Think of all the time I've wasted in school!"

That stopped Mr. Mohammadi in his tracks. "Just a little business joke," I gulped.

If you want to start a business, take it from me: advertise! With Mr. Mohammadi's help, Jinx and I spread the word about "R.R. and J.B. Stepcards." Believe it or not, within one week, we sold 17 of our cards and had orders for 20 more. That's 37 cards! We'd make back all the money we spent on supplies. We'd even have some left over.

"Now that we'll have a little extra money, why not buy some stickers and glitter?" Jinx suggested. "Let's make the cards even prettier."

I was thinking about my calculator. I wanted to buy it as soon as I could. "But, Renaldo," Jinx said, "if we make our cards prettier, we'll sell more and make more money."

That made sense. Then I could buy the calculator and a new pair of soccer shoes.

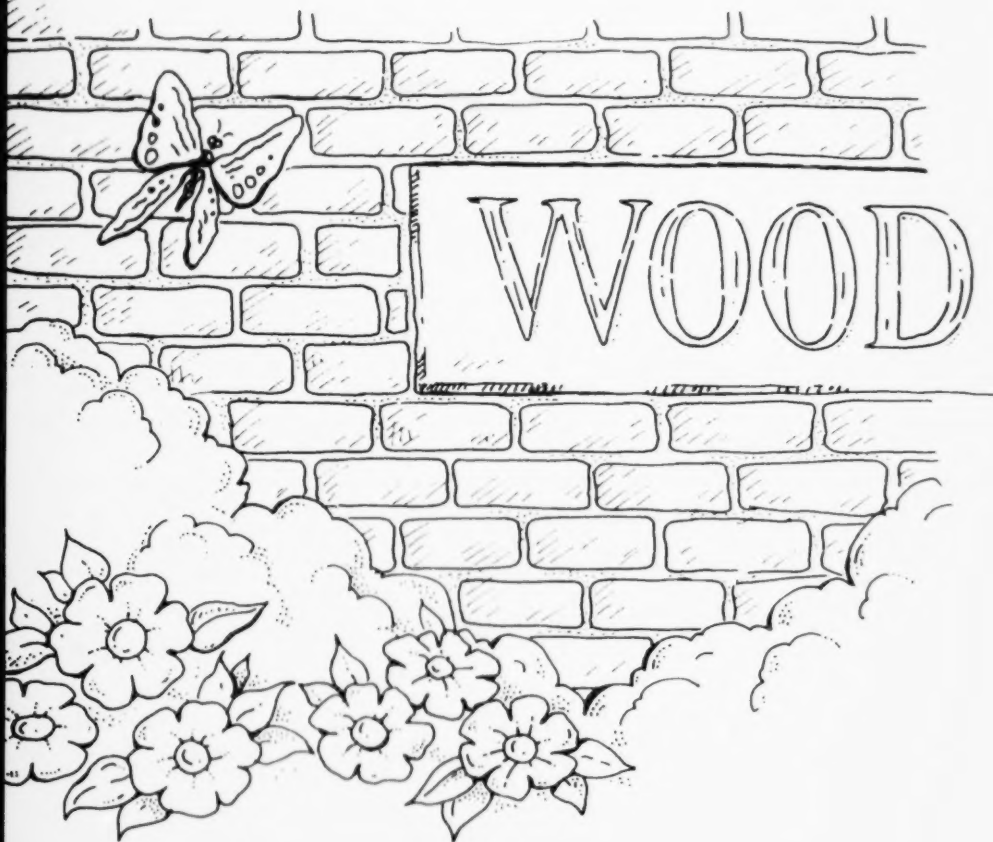


"Don't forget," Jinx reminded me, "we have to pay to use the copying machine." We had to make copies of the advertisement Mr. Mohammadi was going to send home with the kids.

"And we need copies to take to the Senior Center, too," I told Jinx. I remember Mom saying, "You have to spend some money to make money." We thought that advertising was the best way to get more sales.

We thought right! Every day more orders came in the mail.

This was going to be a snap.



## CHAPTER 6

Jinx and I had to work every afternoon that week to fill the orders. And every day more orders came in.

Jeremy Kendall's stepsisters had their birthdays coming up, so he ordered two cards from "R.R. and J.B. Stepcards." Mrs. Rothman (from the Senior Center) told us her son had just married a woman with twin boys, and she needed birthday cards for her stepgrandchildren. Roger Neville's stepfather was in the hospital, so he wanted a special get well card. And Joanne Spinoza's mother, Lena, wanted a stepcousin Valentine.

Phew! Jinx and I could hardly believe how well our business was going. We just didn't expect how happy people would be with our cards.

"You know, Jinx," I said, as I lined up the paint jars, "it's nice to give people something special."

Jinx agreed. "Jeremy told me that our card really helped him tell his stepmother how much he liked her."

"No kidding?"

"You know what else? He said she cried a little when she read it, and then she said she really liked him, too."

"Hey," I said, "making people happy is a pretty good way to make a living."

We talked so long that it was soon time for Jinx to go home. We planned to get together again on Tuesday night.

Then came Tuesday morning.

"That's right," Mr. Beame was saying, "there will be a test tomorrow on the four food groups. Be sure you have food on the brain."

"Well, there goes our business for tonight," Jinx whispered. "We'll have to start again on Wednesday."

"But Wednesday we have Computer Club," I pointed out.

"And Thursday is gymnastics," Jinx said. "We have to work sometime. We have orders to fill."

Jinx was only partly right. We had *lots* of orders to fill. Whether we worked or not, the orders still kept coming in. Somewhere, from far away, I heard a little voice telling me to "plan carefully," and that voice sounded much too much like my Mom's.

"Okay," I whispered back, "we'll work all day Saturday to make up for the days we lost this week."

"That's okay with me," said Jinx. I could tell it wasn't completely okay. But what could we do?

"Saturday it is!"

## CHAPTER 7

Saturday. Mall Day. But not for us. We were up to our eyeballs in "R.R. and J.B. Stepcards."

"What do you mean we're out of paint?" Jinx shouted. Jinx didn't shout much, but, boy, she was making up for lost time now. "Who was in charge of supplies, Renaldo Rodriguez?"

"Who took so many orders?" I asked.

"I was supposed to take orders!"

Jinx had a point there, but that just made me angrier.

"So what do we do now?"

What we did was work. Saturday. Mall Day. The whole day. I didn't think it was possible to do so much work in one day, and I wasn't exactly thrilled finding out you could. But at last the cards were done and ready to be delivered.

"I'm bushed," Jinx said.

"Bushed! Is that all? I'm ready to pass out!" We were still a little angry with one another, but too tired to fight. We were also too tired to sort and deliver all of the stepcards. But the work had to be done.

The question was, "How?"

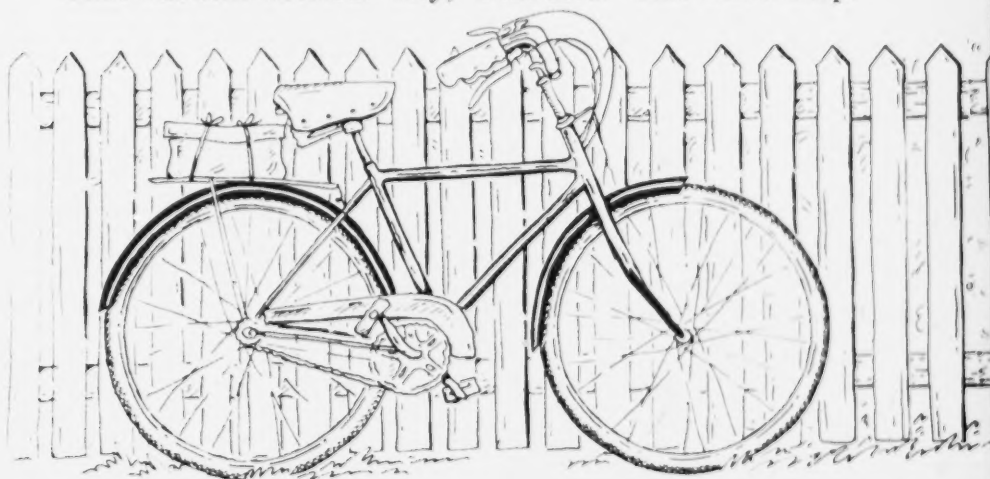
"I have a good idea," I said mysteriously.

"Josue! Josue!" I called. "Oh, Josue, would you mind coming here for a minute?"

You've probably guessed it by now. I hired Josue to sort and deliver the cards. What made it great was that he worked for next to nothing. Two dollars was just fine with him.

Jinx wasn't too impressed with my new plan, but she was too beat to argue. "Jinx, you worry too much," I said. "Let's go celebrate! Pizza all around. My treat!"

Jinx was still worried. "Hey," I shouted. "This was a snap."





## CHAPTER 8

To make the whole world seem brighter, there's nothing like a Polotti's pepperoni and sausage pizza. Jinx and I were friends again, our business was booming, and I could even get my little brother to work for peanuts! Jinx and I made new business plans as we walked back home.

"Renaldo Rodriguez!" I heard as soon as I opened the door. I knew something was very wrong. That little voice in my head that was warning me to "plan carefully" was now a great big voice, and it was coming from a very real, and a very angry, mother—my mother!

"Renaldo, just what did you do with the cards?"

"What do you mean, Mom?" I asked in my most innocent voice.

"What I mean is that the phone has been ringing off the hook with people complaining that they received the wrong step-cards."

"Well, Mom," I began to explain. It didn't matter. Mom hardly stopped to take a breath. She was going strong.

"The last call was from Mrs. Rothman. She has twin step-grandsons. They're having a birthday. Know what she got?"

"The wrong card?" I thought that was a safe bet.

"I'll tell you what she got!"

*'So sorry you're sick,*

*So sorry you're blue.*

*An R.R. and J.B. Stepcard*

*Is just the thing for you!"*

"Ouch!" I thought. That was one of my favorite cards. I was especially proud of how we worked in our initials.

"Then there's the card Roger Neville's stepfather got in the hospital."

*'You're a cute little angel,  
We know that's true.  
Here's a cute little card,  
On the day you turn two.'*

Double ouch. I began to wonder how much a lawyer would cost.

"Do you want me to go on?" my mother asked us in a way only mothers can ask things.

"No," I said and explained the whole thing to her and how Josue must have gotten the cards mixed up. I knew it would do no good to blame Josue. "You get what you pay for," I sighed.

"What should we do, Mrs. Rodriguez?" Jinx asked.

Back to the expert, I thought.

"We? We! We!" she kept saying. I was going to tell her that she sounded like the one little pig that cried all the way home, but I thought I would save that observation for another time.

"Well, Renaldo," she said as she calmed down, "perhaps your friends could help you out of this mess. Perhaps they could collect the cards and deliver them—to the correct addresses this time."

"Right, Mom," I exclaimed. "I mean, what are friends for, after all? A friend in need is a friend indeed! Right, Mom?" My spirits rose. Always go to the expert—that was the lesson of this business venture.

"And what are you going to pay those friends?" the expert asked.

"Pay?"

"Pay."

One thing about spirits: no sooner do they head up, than they're right on their way down again. "But, Mom, if I pay my friends, there won't be any money left for me or for Jinx."

"And if you don't pay them?"

I knew what she meant. That's the trouble with the expert: you don't always get the answer that you're looking for.

## CHAPTER 9

**Y**es, Jinx and I paid our friends to collect all the cards and deliver them again.

No, we did not make any money from "R.R. and J.B. Step-cards."



Yes, we were pretty upset about the way things worked out. "Business!" I grumbled. "Who needs it?"

One night several weeks later, I was out in the backyard playing soccer with my Dad. Dad thinks he's a champion goalie, but I hold back a lot. After all, he tries so hard.

When we stopped for a break, Dad said, "Renaldo, do you remember that stepcard business you started?"

"Dad, I could hardly forget it."

"Well, I was thinking," Dad went on in his quiet way. "What if . . ." And my very own Dad told me about the greatest business idea I had ever heard! I can't tell you about it here. I'm not taking any chances, you know.

"Renaldo, where are you going?" Dad shouted as I ran toward the house.

"Where am I going?" I shouted back. "Dial B for Braxton!" And I ran inside to get Jinx on the phone.



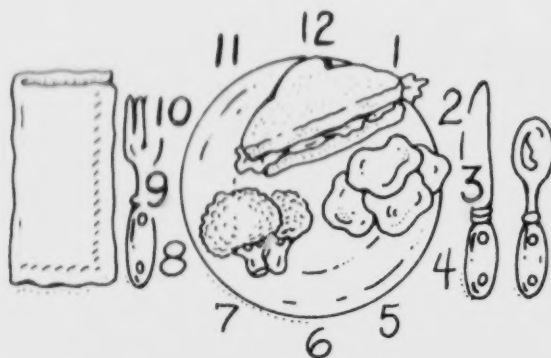
## Questions for Renaldo

Lots of kids have questions for me about what it's like to be blind. I bet you do, too. Here are some questions other kids have asked me before. Take a look. Your question might be here.

**Q.** If you're blind, how do you eat?

**A.** I have a special way to find the food on my plate. I just pretend my plate is like a clock. Then my Mom or Dad or whoever is around tells me where the different foods are. Like, my sandwich is at twelve o'clock, or my chips at three o'clock, or (ugh!) the broccoli is at seven o'clock. If I want my sandwich, my hand goes right to old twelve o'clock. This way I can always find exactly what I want to eat.

If I'm with someone who doesn't know my clock system, I teach it to them. Or I just ask them to tell me what there is to eat. I can usually tell what I'm eating by the way it feels with my fork or fingers.



**Q.** When you ate your broccoli, your Mom said that you were “a sight for sore eyes.” How do you feel about people making jokes like that or when they say words like “look” or “see”?

**A.** Everybody likes to laugh and joke around, and I’m just like everyone else. Sometimes I make jokes about being blind, too. Once my friend Brenda said to me, “Are you really blind?” And I held my hand up to my face and said, “Since the last time I checked!” But I don’t like jokes that hurt my feelings or make fun of me. Just like everyone else.

I don’t mind when people use words like “look” and “see.” I use them myself. That’s because those words are used all the time. Lots of times kids say, “Look!” when they’re trying to get someone’s attention. Or they say, “See what I mean!” Those words are just part of the usual way of talking.

**Q.** How did you get blind?

**A.** Some people are born blind. Other people become blind for different reasons after they are born. I became blind after I was born. I was a “preemie”—you know, a premature baby—because I was born too early and too small. I was supposed to be born on Christmas but was born on Halloween instead. Boy, were my parents and the doctors surprised! Since I was so small, my lungs were not ready to breathe on their own yet. They needed extra help. So the hospital put me in a special baby bed called an incubator. They put oxygen in the incubator to help me breathe, but it also hurt my eyes. It made me blind. The doctors said this happens sometimes, but they are not sure why.

**Q.** How do you read?

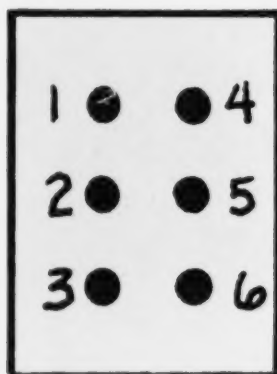
**A.** I read books in three ways. I read books in Braille, or I listen to "Talking Books," or I use a "reader."

**Q.** What is Braille?

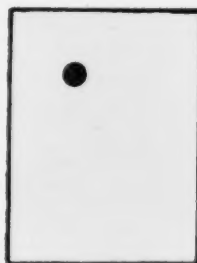
**A.** Braille is a special code for reading and writing that uses raised dots or bumps to stand for letters. When *you* read, you read with your eyes. When I read, I read with my fingers. I read letters and words by feeling the Braille dots. Braille was invented by Louis Braille, a blind teenager who lived in France over a hundred years ago.

The way the code works is pretty neat. Each letter of the alphabet is made by a pattern of raised dots called a Braille cell. The Braille cell has six dots on it, and each dot has a number.

It looks like this:



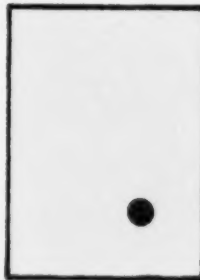
There are enough combinations of the dots to make up the letters of the alphabet, all the numbers for counting, and other things, like punctuation marks. For example, the letter "a" is a dot on the number 1 spot of a Braille cell and looks like this:



The letter "r" is made by dots on the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5 of a Braille cell. It looks like this:



If I want to make a capital letter, I use two Braille cells. In the first one, there is a dot on the number 6. That is the symbol for a capital letter. In the second Braille cell, there is the letter I want capitalized. Suppose I want to write the first letter of my name, "R" (as in "Renaldo the Great"). I use the symbol for a capital letter, a dot on the number 6, and then I use another Braille cell to show the "r." Like this:



Here is what the Braille alphabet looks like:

### LETTERS:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a | b | c | d | e | f | g | h | i | j | k | l | m |
| ⠁ | ⠃ | ⠉ | ⠑ | ⠅ | ⠋ | ⠗ | ⠈ | ⠎ | ⠊ | ⠅ | ⠇ | ⠍ |
| n | o | p | q | r | s | t | u | v | w | x | y | z |
| ⠏ | ⠥ | ⠕ | ⠖ | ⠗ | ⠚ | ⠞ | ⠥ | ⠦ | ⠵ | ⠭ | ⠽ | ⠵ |

### NUMBERS:

Number  
sign:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 0 |
| ⠼ | ⠠ | ⠠ | ⠠ | ⠠ | ⠠ | ⠠ | ⠠ | ⠠ | ⠠ | ⠠ |

### PUNCTUATION:

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| , | ; | : | . | ! | ( | ) | ? | - | ' | " | ” |
| ⠂ | ⠆ | ⠒ | ⠆ | ⠆ | ⠆ | ⠆ | ⠆ | ⠆ | ⠆ | ⠆ | ⠆ |

If you would like to get your own free Braille card printed in real Braille (you can actually feel the raised dots), write to me at the following address.

Renaldo Rodriguez  
Free Braille Card  
National Federation of the Blind  
1800 Johnson Street  
Baltimore, MD 21230

I'll send you a copy.

**Q.** What are "Talking Books"?

**A.** These are books that are recorded on tape. I listen to the same words you read. Our library at school has lots of books on tape that teachers can use in their listening centers. I can borrow these or send away for books on tape from special catalogues. You can get a catalogue of books on tape, too. Just write to the following address.

The National Library Service for the  
Blind and Physically Handicapped  
The Library of Congress  
1291 Taylor Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20542

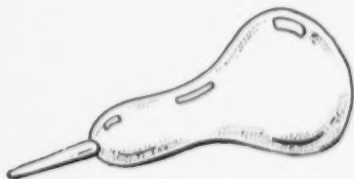
Sometimes my Mom or Dad will make me a tape by recording their voices as they read a story on our tape recorder. I have a whole library of homemade talking books.

**Q.** What are "readers"?

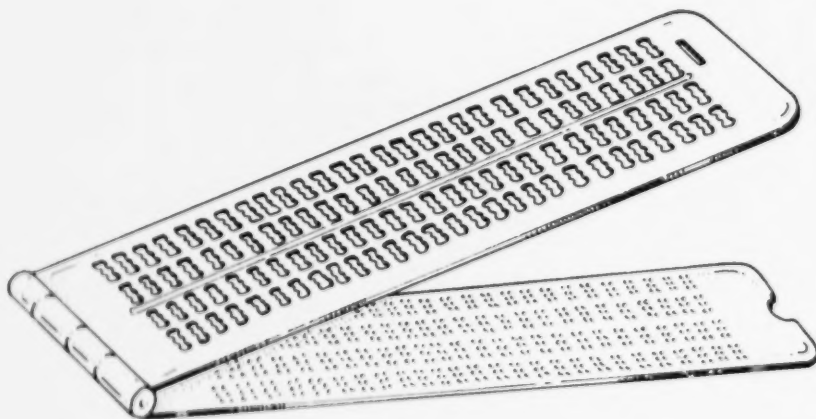
**A.** Sometimes the book or magazine article that I want to read is not available in Braille or on tape, so I use "readers." Readers are people who actually read to me. Of course, my Mom and Dad have read to me since I was little. And now Josue can read some things to me. I also have friends who volunteer to read to me in the school library. When I get older and go to college, I will hire people to read the things I cannot get in Braille or on tape.

**Q.** What's a stylus and slate? How do you use them to write?

**A.** A stylus is a special tool used to write Braille. It's a short, stubby tool with a fat handle and a point on the end that looks like this. It has no ink in it.

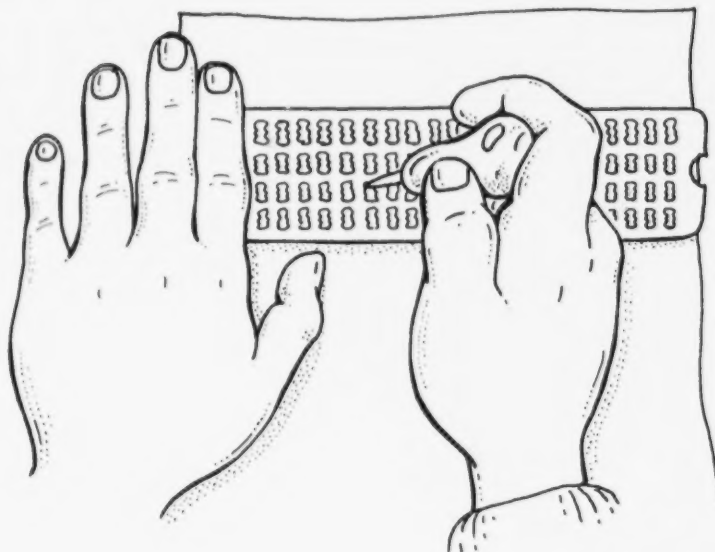


The slate is a metal holder that opens up like this:



The top part has rows of open spaces, and the bottom part has places to punch in dots for the Braille cells.

Special paper fits in between the two parts—you know, just like a sandwich. I hold the stylus in my fist and write in Braille by pressing dots onto the paper—like this:



So I use my stylus and slate to write. How about that!

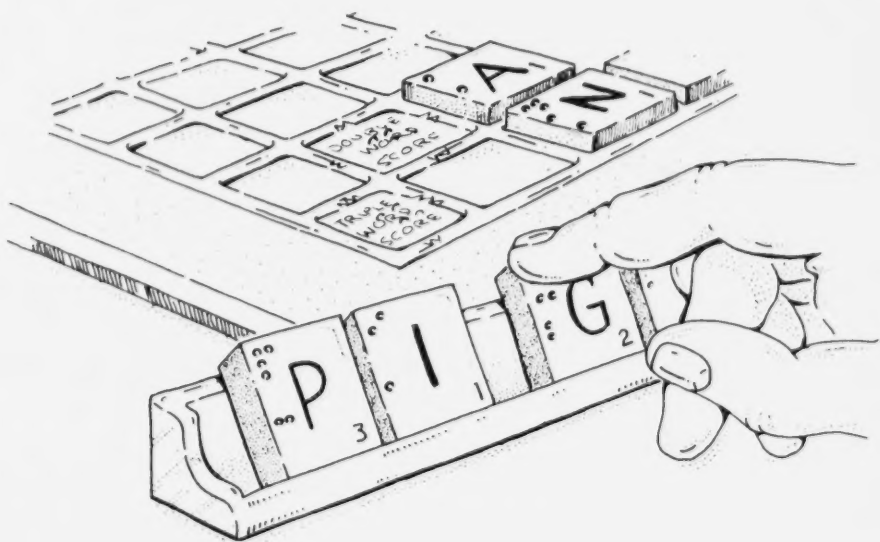
My stylus and slate come in handy when I have to write down homework assignments or when I have to write notes to myself. Sometimes, I teach my friends Braille. That way we can write secret messages to each other.

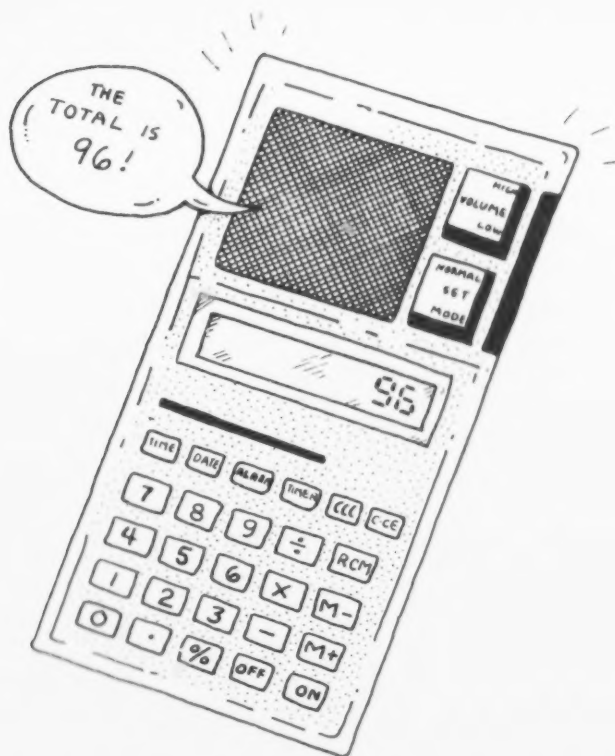
When I write something a sighted person has to read, like my teacher, Mr. Beame, I use a regular typewriter. I just memorize where the keys are—like everyone else.

**Q.** How do you play Scrabble?

**A.** I have a special Scrabble game made for blind people. The game has square tiles, just like the regular Scrabble game. But on each tile and on the board, the letters are written in Braille as well. There are also raised lines on the Scrabble board. That way, I can feel where the tiles fit on the game board.

There are lots of games made so blind people can play them. I have playing cards with the Braille letters and numbers on them. I have a checker set with a special board and checkers. And, of course, there is my favorite: Monopoly. The game board has ridges to mark all the different properties (like my favorite, Boardwalk!), and the cards are a jumbo size written in both Braille and print.





**Q.** You said that you want to get a calculator that's made especially for blind people. How does it work?

**A.** This special calculator works just like the kind that a sighted person would use: you punch in the numbers and the function (like adding or subtracting), and the calculator figures out the right answer. (I have to memorize where the keys are, of course. Hey, there's a lot of stuff for me to remember!) There is a display screen, like a regular calculator has, but there is also a voice, a funny robot-like computer voice, that tells me what number I pushed, what function I chose, and what the answer is. I hear what's going on the same way you see what's going on.

**Q.** What do you use your cane for?

**A.** My cane helps me to get around. I keep moving it back and forth in front of me, and it "shows" me when something is in my way. When I tap my cane in front of me, the sound it makes gives me clues about where I am. Lots of blind people use canes.

There are folding canes, too. Kids don't usually use them because they are not as sturdy as a rigid or nonfolding cane. But they are convenient. I know this blind woman who's a lawyer. She has to travel all around the country and takes airplanes everywhere. She told me that she likes it that her cane folds up and she can put it right under her seat on the plane.

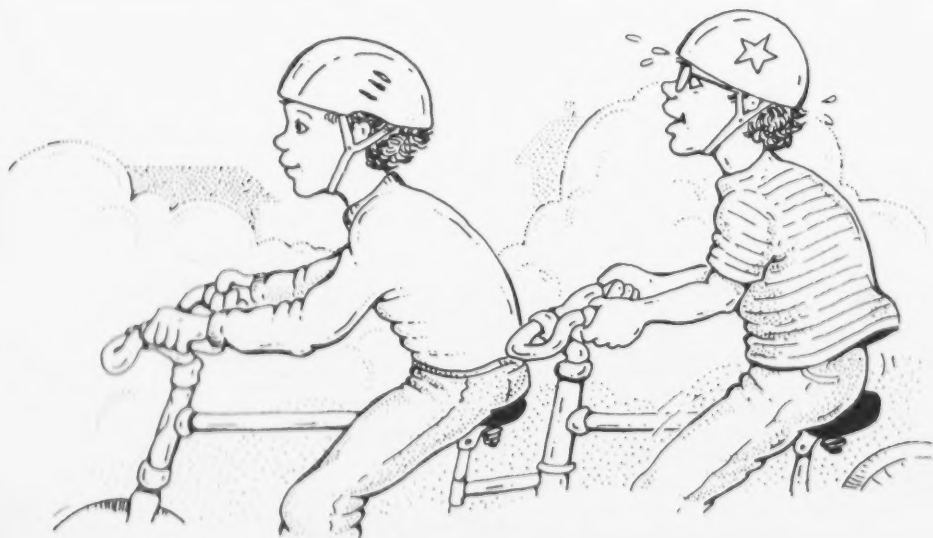
**Q.** If you go somewhere new, how do you keep from bumping into things?

**A.** I have this really good mobility teacher. She comes to my regular school a couple of times a week. She teaches me how to get around on my own and how not to be afraid when I'm in a brand new place. I can go by myself to places that are not too far away or that I've been to before. When I go someplace brand new to me, I usually take a friend with me. My friend takes me around and helps me learn the new place. I walk with my friend by holding onto his or her elbow. I don't like to have people hold my hand or pull me around. That makes me feel like a baby. Lots of people do too much for blind kids. They forget to ask us first. If I want help, I'll let them know.

In my own house, I have to remember where everything is! Like chairs, tables, the television—I keep them all stored up in the old brain. I can zip all over my house, unless someone moves something without telling me first. Once my Mom rearranged the living room and forgot to tell me. I almost walked into the wall! Even my Dad got confused. We said, “Ma, don’t move stuff without telling us first!”

**Q.** Will you ever drive a car?

**A.** No, blind people can’t do that. I can ride a bicycle, though. I ride a tandem bike. That means that the bike is made for two people to ride. Have you ever heard of “a bicycle built for two”? My brother rides in the front so he can steer, and I ride in the back and do most of the pedalling. Hey! How come I’m the one who ends up doing all of the work!



**Q.** I heard that blind people hear things and smell things better than other people who can see. Are you like that?

**A.** My friend Brenda once thought that, too. She even called me "The Great Renaldo—Super Ears and Super Nose!" I told her that I have regular ears and a regular nose. Nothing super about it. It's just that I use them more than people who can see. I depend on them. Let's say you're starting across the street and a car is coming. *You* can see the car coming; *you* can see it stop. If you're blind, like me, you have to depend on your ears to listen for the car to stop. And you'd better be right! Because I use my ears, my nose, and my hands so much to tell me what's going on around me, it seems like those parts of me work better than those parts of you. But our ears, noses, and hands are the same. It's just the way I use them that makes me super.

**Q.** If you're blind, why do you wear glasses?

**A.** I wear lightly tinted glasses because bright light can bother my eyes. (Besides, I look pretty cool in them, don't I?)

A long time ago, almost all blind people wore dark glasses. Some of them needed the glasses because the light hurt their eyes. But lots of blind people wore those dark glasses because their eyeballs looked so different from regular ones. I've never seen my own eyes, so I don't know what they look like. But my brother Josue tells me that they look like two fried eggs! I'll tell you one thing, though. I'm not ashamed or embarrassed about how my eyes look. When people get used to seeing eyes

that are different from regular eyes, they don't feel funny about it at all. Except for my brother, the comedian.

**Q.** How do you use the phone?

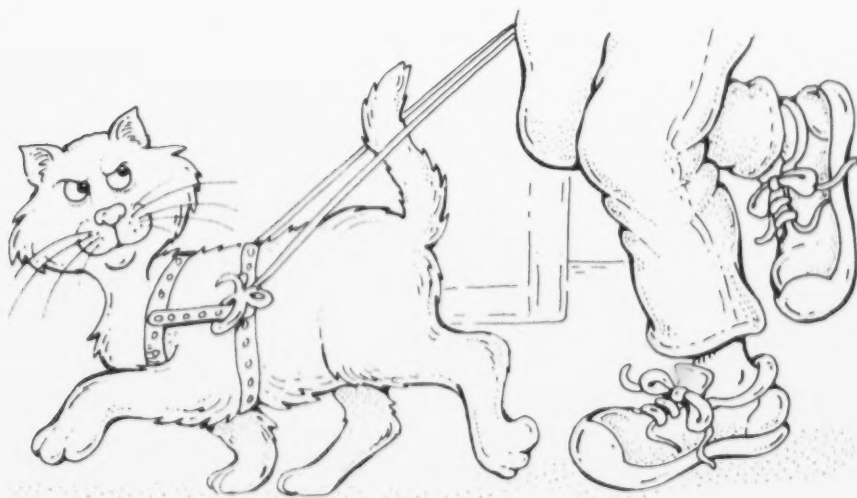
**A.** I use the phone by pushing the buttons the same way you do. I learned to memorize the numbers by touch, just like using a typewriter or calculator. (See: there is a lot to remember.)

Here's an experiment you can try. Look at the picture with the rows of squares. Make a copy of your own. Imagine that it is a phone. Now try to draw in the numbers and letters where they are on a real phone. See if you can get the right numbers with the right letters! It's funny that something you see every day can be so hard to remember exactly. But you can memorize it, too.



**Q.** Are you going to get a seeing-eye dog?

**A.** I don't know. Where I live, you have to be sixteen years old to get one. If I were to get one (I'd like a German shepherd!), I'd have to go to school. (What? More school!) You see, the dog has to be trained, and I do, too. We have to learn to be a team. Some blind people have guide dogs, but most just use canes to get around. I like using my cane, but maybe I'll ask my parents about getting a guide dog when I'm older. Once I tried to teach my cat to be a seeing-eye cat. She would only take me to one place: her litter box!



**Q.** How can you tell differences in money?

**A.** I'll show you. Take out a penny, nickel, dime, and quarter. If you close your eyes and start to feel them, you'll be able to tell some important differences. The penny and the nickel are

different sizes, and they are smooth around the edge. The quarter and the dime are also different in size, but they have ridges around their edges. By feeling for those differences, I can tell which coin I'm holding.

With paper money, blind people have their own system for telling the bills apart. I mark the bills by folding them. The one-dollar bills I just leave alone. The five-dollar bills I fold in half. The ten-dollar bills I fold twice—in half and then in half again. Now, for twenties, fifties, and hundreds, I'm not sure. I've never had one of those, but I'd sure like to!

**Q.** How do you get dressed?

**A.** I get dressed the same way you do: the legs go in the pants holes; the arms go in the arm holes; and the feet go in the socks. But if you mean how do I tell my clothes apart, well, I have a system. When I was a little kid, before I learned to read Braille, my Mom put tags of stuff that smelled good (like Scratch 'n' Sniff stickers) in the back of my shirts and pants. I just matched the smells to get dressed. See, I would sniff my shirt, and it might smell like a pine tree. Then I would sniff my pants to find the jeans that also smelled like a pine tree. That way, when I got dressed, I didn't look like Bozo the Clown! But it wasn't easy, smelling like a forest all the time.

I can tell what some things are by remembering how they feel. Also, some of my clothes have Braille tags on them. When I grow up and have to wear a tie every day, Braille tags on my ties will really come in handy!

**Q.** How do you play soccer?

**A.** I play soccer and baseball by using special balls. They have beepers inside the ball. The beeper helps me hear the sound of the ball coming toward me. As the ball gets closer, the sound of the beeper gets louder. Then my coach will help me by yelling to me, "Swing" or "Kick."

I am also a terrific swimmer, if I do say so myself. I am on the Woodburn swim team, and last year I placed second in the finals for backstroke! Not bad, huh?



**Q.** Do you know what colors are?

**A.** I think colors must be wonderful. Not that I've ever seen them. I don't know for sure what colors look like, but I have feelings about them. Here's an example. I know that the sun is bright orange and yellow, so when I feel something hot like the sun, I think it must be a glowing orange or yellow color. Green seems like such a fresh color. I think of the summer grass or the forest trees. And water is a cool blue, so wet things seem blue to me!

Sometimes my brother Josue and I play a game. He gives me something to feel, and then I guess the color. Sometimes I guess right! When I don't, Josue describes the color by making it seem like something I've felt or heard. That way I can think about colors and talk about them, too.

**Q.** How do you make friends, and how do your friends treat you?

**A.** I make friends the same way you do. I go up to people and introduce myself. I join in all kinds of activities and games.

I also tell other kids about what it's like to be blind. I try to make them more comfortable by letting them ask me questions. Sometimes kids are too embarrassed to ask questions. They shouldn't be. I'm not embarrassed about being blind. It's just different. Everyone is different in some way. And that means we're all the same, too. Get it?

## About The Kids on the Block

Founded in 1977 by Barbara Aiello, The Kids on the Block puppet program was formed to introduce young audiences to the topic of children with disabilities. Since then the goals and programs of The Kids on the Block have evolved and broadened to encompass a wide spectrum of individual differences and social concerns.

Barbara Aiello is nationally recognized for her work in special education. The former editor of *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Ms. Aiello has won numerous awards for her work with The Kids on the Block, including the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped Distinguished Service Award, the Easter Seal Communications Award for Outstanding Public Service, and the Epilepsy Foundation of America's Outstanding Achievement Award. Her puppets have appeared in all 50 states and throughout the world. In addition, over 1,000 groups in the United States and abroad make The Kids on the Block puppets an effective part of their community programs.

## For More Information

The Kids on the Block  
9385-C Gerwig Lane  
Columbia, Maryland 21046  
800-368-KIDS

American Council of the Blind (ACB)  
1010 Vermont Ave., N.W., Suite 1100  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
202-393-3666  
800-424-8666

American Foundation for the Blind  
(AFB)  
15 W. 16th St.  
New York, NY 10011  
212-620-2000  
800-232-5463

American Printing House for the Blind  
P.O. Box 6085  
1839 Frankfort Ave.  
Louisville, KY 40206  
502-895-2405

National Association for Parents of  
Visually Impaired Children (NAPVI)  
P.O. Box 562  
Camden, NY 13316  
315-245-3442  
800-562-6265

National Federation of the Blind (NFB)  
1800 Johnson St.  
Baltimore, MD 21230  
301-659-9314  
800-356-7713

Recording for the Blind, Inc.  
20 Roszel Rd.  
Princeton, NJ 08540  
609-452-0606  
800-221-4792

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## ***Business Is Looking Up***

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